

LAMENTATIONS FOR TODAY: PART 2¹

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Abstract: Explores the profound relevance of the biblical book of Lamentations in addressing trauma and grief. It highlights the destructive impact of trauma, including PTSD, which silences victims and traps them in cycles of pain. Drawing from interdisciplinary studies, the author emphasizes the importance of lament as a transformative process for healing. Lamentations provides a language for expressing grief, enabling individuals to confront their past, name their pain, and move toward recovery. The book's vivid depictions of suffering—cannibalism, famine, rape, and destruction—mirror the experiences of trauma survivors, offering them a voice and a pathway to healing. By verbalizing pain, survivors can integrate their experiences, reclaim agency, and reconnect with God and community. The article critiques superficial approaches to grief, advocating for an honest engagement with sorrow as a prerequisite for hope and renewal. Ultimately, Lamentations serves as a spiritual and emotional tool, helping individuals process their trauma, break free from denial, and find comfort in God's presence. It underscores the necessity of mourning as a step toward healing, resilience, and the restoration of humanity, offering a biblical framework for navigating the complexities of grief and loss.

INTRODUCTION

Men carrying machine guns load women and children into trucks, drive them to a mass grave, and then riddle their bodies with bullets. Godless governments trap citizens in abject poverty with no way out. Infants are frantic for formula, orphans are longing for a home, young mothers are trafficked as sex slaves, and entire countries are on the brink of economic collapse.

When we consider all the evil—the pornography industry, the ideology of terror, rampant greed, the enduring impacts of alcoholism—it is tempting to hang our heads in frustration, shrug our shoulders, and get on with life as best we can. Overwhelming evidence shows that pillaging profiteers of unrighteousness are winning the day.

Our response? Tune out. Numb out. Check out.

Is there a better way? Yes. Lamentations. While the historical context of the book is the immediate aftermath of 587 BC, Kathleen O'Connor maintains, "The power of its poetry can embrace the sufferings of any whose bodies and spirits are worn down and assaulted, whose boundaries have shrunk, who are trapped, and who face foreclosed futures."²

TRAUMA STUDIES

One popular view on working through trauma comes from Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. She made famous this five-point process following loss: 1) denial and isolation, 2) rage and anger, 3) bargaining, 4) depression, and 5) acceptance.³ Kübler-Ross advanced this model based on her study on how bereaved people coped with the loss of loved ones. She did not ground it upon empirical

¹ This article is adapted from the *Concordia Commentary - Lamentations* by R. Reed Lessing (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024).

² Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), xiv.

³ Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (London/Toronto: Collier-Macmillan, 1969), 10-33.

research.⁴ Originally, Kübler-Ross intended her taxonomy to describe steps for people facing their death. However, it quickly morphed into a process of how to cope with any kind of deep trauma. For instance, Paul Joyce follows Kübler-Ross' paradigm in his outline of Lamentations: Chapter One, denial and isolation; Chapter Two, anger; Chapter Three, bargaining; Chapter Four, depression; and Chapter Five, acceptance.⁵

Dalit Rom-Shiloni doubts that reactions to trauma are so linear.⁶ Others agree that it is dubious to think people experience the stages of grief in such a strictly sequential manner.⁷ Moving beyond Kübler-Ross, in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association added the term "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD) to its diagnostic manual.⁸ Kathleen O'Connor describes trauma with these words:

It so overwhelms the capacities of victims to take in that the violence cannot be absorbed as it is happening. Traumatic violence comes as a shocking blow, a terrifying disruption of normal mental processes, distorting reality, even as it becomes the only reality.⁹

PTSD describes combat veterans, battered women, rape survivors, and abused children. It characterizes people ruled by tyrants—tyrants who rule nations and tyrants who rule families. "Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts."¹⁰

Those with PTSD become frozen in time. Memories become indelibly etched in their minds. They replay the nightmare repeatedly. They rehash traumatic moments in their thinking and even in their dreams. "Even though I am here, I know that the smallest thing—a song, a sound, a smell—can send me back there."¹¹

Trauma destroys people's capacity to tell their stories. They have snapshots and memories—even smells and tastes—but they cannot combine them. It is a bunch of mumbo-jumbo.

Selective amnesia appears as the only way to function. "Hear, say, and speak no evil." Those who have PTSD draw a curtain between the past and the present. Perpetrators insidiously encourage—and sometimes insist—on secrecy and silence. When this fails, they launch attacks against the credibility of the victim. "She had it coming!" "How could you believe *his* story?" "What an exaggeration!" "They're making this up!" Powerful forces render victims voiceless, unable to talk about their pain. There is a term for this—shellshocked.

⁴ Ruth D. Konigsberg, *The Truth about Grief: The Myth of the Five Stages and the New Science of Loss* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011). George A. and Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us about Life after Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

⁵ Paul M. Joyce, "Lamentations and the Grief Process: A Psychological Reading," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993): 304-20, 308-20.

⁶ Dalit Rom-Shiloni, *Voices from the Ruins: Theodicy and the Fall of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 93.

⁷ David J. Reimer nuances Kübler-Ross's view in "Good Grief? A Psychological Reading of Lamentations," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114 (2002): 542–59.

⁸ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 33. She states that PTSD happens when events consist of "physical violation or injury, exposure to extreme violence, or witnessing grotesque death ... When neither resistance nor escape is possible, the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized." Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 34.

⁹ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 3.

¹⁰ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 37. June F. Dickie concurs: "Trauma ... disrupts the way memories are processed, preventing them from being stored in long-term, 'past-time' memory." June F. Dickie, "Biblical Lament Intersects with Psychotherapy as a Means of Healing the Effects of Trauma," in *When Psychology Meets the Bible*, ed. Heather A. McKay and Pieter van der Zwain (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2023), 19.

¹¹ Ann Hood, *Comfort: A Journey through Grief: A Journey through Grief* (New York: Norton, 2008), 156. William Faulkner writes, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951), 51.

TRAUMA IN LAMENTATIONS

As part of a growing interest in interdisciplinary work, trauma studies entered the field of the Old Testament late in the twentieth century.¹² The book of Lamentations—among other Old Testament books like Jeremiah and Ezekiel—is now frequently identified as trauma literature. Why is the focus so much on Lamentations?

The book replays memories of cannibalism (Lam 2:20b; 4:10), famine (e.g., Lam 1:11a-b; 2:12b; 4:4–8), rape (Lam 1:10a-b; 5:11), the complete dismantling of a city (Lam 2:1–10) and her people (e.g., Lam 4:1–10). Other symptoms of PTSD include the lack of consolation and comfort (Lam 1:2b, 9b, 16b, 17a, 21a) and overwhelming grief (e.g., Lam 1:22c; 5:15).

Survivors were shocked (Lam 1:1a; 2:1a; 4:1a, 2b), isolated (e.g., Lam 1:1a; 2c), had memories of better days (Lam 1:7a-b), and felt deep shame (Lam 1:8a-b). They were stuck in silence (Lam 2:10a), bargaining (Lam 2:18–19; 3:40–42), anger (Lam 2:20), denial (Lam 3:39), weeping (Lam 3:48–51), and blaming (Lam 4:12–13; 5:7).

Warfare brutalizes people while numbing and deadening their hearts. "A single traumatic event can occur almost anywhere. Prolonged, repeated trauma, by contrast, occurs only in circumstances of captivity."¹³ Moreover, Babylonians had Judeans right where they wanted them—entirely subjected.

However, the empire could not take away the author's pen. He gives meaning to pain, words to replace silence, and he resurrects personal agency. "Medically, the binding up of the mental wounds caused by suffering is every bit as important as healing the sufferer's physical wounds."¹⁴

The author of Lamentations encourages us not to deny the past nor to get stuck in it; instead, he invites us to work through our past. "Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world."¹⁵ But how? trauma often prevents survivors from constructing a story about their experiences. They might have "snapshots" of moments, feelings, smells, tastes, and sounds, but they cannot put them together into a sequence that would explain what happened to them and why. "[Trauma] stops the chronological clock and fixes the moment permanently in memory and imagination."¹⁶

Judith Herman suggests that "recovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life."¹⁷

None of this happens in a linear manner. The general development, though, is from fear to security, from denial to acceptance, from stigmatized detachment to community connections. Describing feelings is important in every stage. "Finding a language for pain is one of the needs of those afflicted."¹⁸

Often, distress silences speech. It robs us of words. When we do not talk through trauma, we become slaves to emotions we neither understand nor can control. However, by giving us words that echo our feelings, Lamentations becomes our way out of despondency and despair. The book's words are God's words given to heal and make us whole. "Yhwh does not command shutting up when we feel let down."¹⁹ We can cry out to God in agony. We do not need to hide from God. We can scream in anger at

¹² David G. Garber, "Trauma Studies," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. S.L. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 421–28.

¹³ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 74.

¹⁴ W. F. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 35.

¹⁵ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 70.

¹⁶ Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 174–75.

¹⁷ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 155.

¹⁸ Robin Parry, *Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 206. Dorothee Soelle writes, "If people cannot speak about their affliction, they will be destroyed by it." Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. E. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 76.

¹⁹ John Goldingay, *Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 210. Ellen F. Davis writes, "We cannot have an intimate relationship with someone to whom we cannot speak honestly." Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 2001), 8.

God, against God, and finally with God, who, in Jesus, shares our laments and sorrows. "We must allow the film to roll, and dare to watch it."²⁰

Through the ages, *Lamentations* has helped the faithful survive disasters by giving them a way to express shock and sadness. The book summons us to express our pent-up frustrations and put them on the table in a safe and loving environment. In doing so, negative emotions begin to lose their power, and little by little, we find that we can, in fact, deal with our trauma. "Lamentations can melt frozen and numbed spirits."²¹

NAMING THE PAIN

Denial dismisses pain. It puts on a happy face. It saddles up and keeps on riding. Denial was Judah's response to Babylon's impending invasion (Jer 5:21; 6:14; 8:11). Scott Ellington maintains:

So strong is the need to hold on to a stable rendering of reality that the one suffering may even be willing to commit intellectual, moral, and emotional suicide in order to preserve an ordered world, regardless of its flaws.²²

Living in the land of make-believe creates even more angst and anguish. Choosing fiction over reality never works—but that does not keep us from trying to beat the odds. We avoid facing the music, getting honest, and naming our pain. Herman writes, "The typical response to atrocity and trauma is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social contract are too terrible to allow them to come to consciousness or to be uttered aloud."²³

Denial finds a million ways to cope with painful memories—overeating, overdrinking, overworking, overexercising, overspending. Nicolaus Wolterstorff writes:

To voice suffering, one must name it—identify it. Sometimes that is difficult, even impossible. The memories are repressed so that the suffering is screened from view. Or one is aware of it, in a way; but naming it, identifying it for what it is, would be too painful, too embarrassing.²⁴

Lamentations refuses to whitewash what happened. The book spells out Judah's demise in great detail. Following the author's lead, we can name our pain, lament our loss, face our failures, and refuse to live in denial. Truth begins to surface. The past begins to loosen its iron grip. "Laments are the beginning of action, a rejection of passivity, and so they can invert despair."²⁵ *Lamentations'* five poems expose wounds to the healing power of the Gospel.

This is Daughter Zion's experience. She finds her voice, slowly at first (Lam 1:9c; 11c)—then with a fury, she emerges full of words (Lam 1:12–15b, 16, 18–22; 2:20–22). In chapter five, first-person speech cascades like a mountain river during a spring thaw. F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp maintains:

For those who come to *Lamentations* hurting and struck dumb by suffering's cruel ravages, not only do they find comfort in the knowledge that they do not suffer alone, but they also find, unbidden, a language for their suffering.²⁶

It is liberating to allow suppressed emotions and voices to surface to tell our story—the good, the bad, and the ugly. It may seem paradoxical, but we need to experience grief in order to alleviate grief. The pain of our past may seem daunting, but through *Lamentations*, we realize that this is the balm that heals our ruptured souls. Kathleen O'Connor writes, "Lamentations can be a resource for the work of

²⁰ Molly Fumia, *A Piece of My Heart: Living through the Grief of Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Infant Death* (Berkeley: Conari Press, 2000), 104.

²¹ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 131.

²² Scott A. Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2008), xii.

²³ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 7.

²⁴ Wolterstorff, "If God Is Good and Sovereign, Why Lament?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (2001): 42–52.

²⁵ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 129.

²⁶ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 35. He also maintains that the book's poems, "individually and collectively, facilitate a recovery of voice that is life giving and life sustaining." Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 134). Delbert R. Hillers concurs, "People live on best after calamity, not by utterly repressing their grief and shock, but by facing it, and by measuring its dimensions." Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 7A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1992), 4.

reclaiming our humanity, for breaking through our denial, personal and social, and for teaching us compassion."²⁷ The book helps us step out of shaming shadows and into the light of God's love in Christ Jesus.

We may think we are finished with our past, but our past is not finished with us. Lynn Caine writes about grieving widows: "Until they can talk, they have not really started on the road to recovery."²⁸ Lamentations expresses and values our wounds and empowers us—like Daughter Zion and the author—to give free rein to the pain bottled up. June Dickie maintains: "Lament can facilitate physiological healing in the brain, allowing toxic memories to be properly processed and stored in the past, no longer to intrude as disturbing flashbacks."²⁹ God accepts us when angry, upset, and drenched with tears.

There is no other way forward. Only the truth sets us free. Lamenting "enables individuals and communities to break with the past without forgetting it."³⁰ And if we do not? "Pain kept from speech pushed underground and denied, will turn and twist and tunnel like a ferret until it grows in those lightless spaces into a violent, unrecognizable monster."³¹ Is that putting it too firmly? Not at all. "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all the day" (Ps 32:3).

To survive, people need language. By retelling the trauma, survivors can integrate, process, and move on. "It is not the *experience* of loss that becomes the defining moment of our lives ... It is how we *respond* to loss that matters."³² And if we do not narrativize our feelings? The event becomes toxic. It is not a memory; it is an ongoing nightmare.

Telling stories is how Lamentations moves us from trauma to healing. "Voiced hurt already contains the seeds of life revived and resurrected."³³ Learning about sorrow is a significant factor in healing from the past and building resilience to survive future heartbreaks.

Lamentations thus helps traumatized people reconnect with God because it helps sufferers "find a language of lament, a cry of pain, words which begin to express what is happening in his or her life."³⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Trauma happens. It happens to us all. "Why? Why did he leave me? Why did she have to die so young? Why did I lose all that money? Why does my job continue to cause me so much anxiety? Why? Why? Why?"

When traumatized, it is almost impossible to remain calm and clearheaded. It is even more challenging to find words that describe what happened. Yet, to reclaim our future, we need to verbalize our past. "The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*."³⁵

If we are going to lament, we must give up the idea that we need to get over our losses as quickly as possible. Our faulty thinking goes like this. "If I can learn the right coping skills, follow these ten steps, pull this lever, push that button, then my pain will subside in no time."

²⁷ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, xiv.

²⁸ Lynn Caine, *Widow* (New York: Morrow, 1974), 140. Herbert L. Gravitz and Julie D. Bowden observe, "No pain is so devastating as the pain of a person refuses to face, and no suffering is so lasting as suffering left unacknowledged." Herbert L. Gravitz and Julie D. Bowden, *Recovery: A Guide for Adult Children of Alcoholics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 37.

²⁹ Dickie, "Biblical Lament," 23.

³⁰ Denise Ackermann, "On Hearing and Lamenting," Pages 47–56 in *To Remember and to Heal*. Edited by H.R. Botman and R. M. Peterson. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1996, 55.

³¹ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 95.

³² Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 9.

³³ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 149.

³⁴ Barbara A. Bozak, "Suffering in the Psalms of Lament: Speech for the Speechless, Power for the Powerless," *Église et théologie* 23 (1992): 325–38, 328. Dickie observes: "The first step in trauma healing is to regain one's voice and recover agency (being the 'subject' rather than the 'object' who was acted upon), and the second step is to reconstruct the story of what happened and to express it." Dickie, "Biblical Lament," 26.

³⁵ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1.

Biblical laments look at this with great pessimism. Jeremiah calls purveyors of quick healing quacks and fakes (cf. Jer 6:14; 8:11). He rejects superficial solutions. Lamentations also insists that we take the past seriously. Dig it up. Remember it well. First things first. Crushing, then hope. Weeping, then joy. Death, then resurrection. Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice maintain:

To the extent that we are not shattered, we do not hope. There is in lament a desperation—even more, a demand—for something deeper, something beyond, something new. Those who are not easily consoled have entered a place of restlessness. They have opened their hands to accept a different vision. They are now ready to receive a better hope.³⁶

This is the way of Jesus. He welcomes honesty. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matt 5:4). The Greek word, translated as "mourn," suggests a sorrow that begins in the heart, takes possession of the entire person, and is outwardly manifested. Mourning is far from superficial and sentimental sorrow.

The only healthy way to address pain is to go through it. "I walk *through* the valley of the shadow death" (Ps 23:4). God pours out immeasurable comfort and consolation on those who mourn—on people who walk through their sorrows. "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the social order and for the healing of individual victims."³⁷

There is something very godly about acknowledging our deep distress. In Gen 6:6, God the Father looks at the world's sin in Noah's day, and his heart grieves. In Luke 19:41, Jesus approaches Jerusalem and weeps over the city. In Ephesians 4:30, Paul writes that sin grieves the Holy Spirit.

When we are tempted to appear super-Christian or super-pastor—a façade that will surely fail us—the book of Lamentations invites us to be honest and human. "Cast your burden upon Yahweh, and he will sustain you" (Ps 55:22).

³⁶ Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 89.

³⁷ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1.